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AN AP ARTS REVIEW: 'Black Nativity' updates the Christmas story

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NEW YORK: If you want to enjoy a musical that puts the Christmas story back into Christmas and rocks it out, you must see — and hear — the Classical Theatre of Harlem's revival of Langston Hughes' 1961 self-described gospel song play, "Black Nativity."

Starring the incomparable Andre De Shields as both the narrator and a somewhat devilish preacher, director Alfred Preisser has updated Hughes' version of the nativity story to 1973 Times Square, through which Mary and Joseph wander in search of a room for the night.

This joyous musical celebration draws in the audience as part of the preacher's congregation as he sermonizes about Mary's journey, the birth of Jesus and the current spiritual state of the world.

Prowling the stage in a sharp red suit, De Shields sings, dances, preaches, keeps time for the chorus and occasionally conducts the gifted cast as they enthusiastically shake the rafters with song and dance, clapping and stamping out the rhythms of the often-jubilant score.

Lively choreography by Tracy Jack, who also plays Mary, and colorful Motown-inspired outfits designed by Kimberly Glennon, make this production a treat for the eyes as well as the ears. The gospel-singing church choir alternates between their purple and red robes and flashy, glamorous costumes worthy of the Supremes, Temptations and Jackson Five.

The 1970s setting enabled Preisser and musical director Kelvyn Bell to creatively arrange familiar gospel songs and hymns, such as "Go Tell It on the Mountain," "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night," both traditionally and in various pop music styles including rhythm and blues, soul and even some funk. Bell also wrote a couple of original numbers for this production and plays lead guitar, alongside talented musicians Kim Davis, Christopher Eddleton and Carlos Homs.

Literally poking fun of the occasional hypocrisy of "church folks," a trio of female choir members is transformed into slinky Motown singers who perform "Pity and a Shame," about how nobody will help the pregnant Mary, while pointing their own gloved fingers of shame at her.

There are also quiet, reverential songs, including several hymns performed by the Shangilia Youth Choir of Kenya. These teenagers, who were rescued from the streets and given performing arts education along with regular schooling, enchant the audience with their heartfelt singing. Some of them also impress as somersaulting street performers in the boisterous finale.

This energetic troupe truly makes a joyful noise unto the Lord. "Black Nativity" runs through Dec. 30 at off-Broadway's Duke Theater.